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**ONLY ONE-THIRD OF WOMEN TAKE VITAMIN THAT REDUCES RISK OF  
BIRTH DEFECTS**

*The Virginia Department of Health Observes National Folic Acid Awareness Week, Jan. 9-15*

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Although 84 percent of women in the United States are aware of folic acid, only 33 percent take it daily, according to a national survey conducted by the Gallup Organization. Daily consumption of 400 micrograms of the B vitamin folic acid can reduce the risk of certain birth defects of the brain and spine by as much as 70 percent.

“We are encouraged that women are aware of folic acid,” said Kathy Orchen, nutrition liaison with the Virginia Department of Health’s (VDH) Division of WIC and Community Nutrition Services. “We urge them to take the next step and take a multivitamin containing folic acid every day.”

Folic acid has been proven effective in reducing spina bifida and anencephaly, the two most common neural tube birth defects. About 40 children are born each year in Virginia with spina bifida, which is caused when a baby’s spine does not close properly. Approximately 10 children are born in Virginia each year with anencephaly, which occurs when the brain does not form properly. Because these neural tube birth defects occur during the first few weeks of pregnancy, it is important that all women of child-bearing age take a vitamin pill that contains folic acid.

Since 1999, VDH has worked with the March of Dimes and others to increase consumption of folic acid. In 2004 and 2005, television stations in several Virginia cities aired a public service announcement featuring Virginia’s first lady Lisa Collis urging women to take folic acid to prevent birth defects. In July 2005, 19 of VDH’s health districts began to distribute folic acid supplements free to their family planning clients. VDH also educates health care providers and women about the value of folic acid through journal articles and exhibits at professional meetings and health fairs.

The best way to get enough folic acid is to take a multivitamin containing folic acid or a folic acid supplement every day. Many foods also contain high levels of folic acid, including enriched cereal, bread, rice, pasta and other grain products, orange juice, dried beans, lentils, spinach, asparagus and leafy green vegetables.

For more information on folic acid and how it can prevent birth defects, visit  
<http://www.vahealth.org/wic/folicacid.htm>.

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